

# CELEBRATE THE BURNING OF WASHINGTON

In the Following Article on "Washington Old and New," Joaquin Miller, the California Poet, for Years a Resident of the Capital City, Suggests a Novel Centennial Celebration for Washington in 1914.

By JOAQUIN MILLER.

Behold yond mighty dome mid-air!  
Yond monument in pointed prayer;  
Whistler over all, so fair, so fair,  
Sing thine angels every where.

**YOU** want me to talk about Washington city; old and new Washington? Certainly. For I like our great National Capital. Besides that, I own a part of it, as does every other American who has paid his poll tax.

"To begin with, Washington is unique, and must be looked at in another light from that in which we contemplate all other cities, old or new.

"All other capitals, ancient and modern, were, to begin with, commercial capitals, founded and built by traders; sea or land, mostly merchants of the sea. The kings and emperors of Europe found their capitals ready for them. They set up their thrones in their strongest cities, and held them at the point of the sword.

## Foundation in Grass Roots.

"But the foundations of this, our National Capital, were laid in the grass roots. Commerce, the coming and passing of ships of the sea or ships of the desert, had nothing at all to do with the creating of Washington city. The deep reverence for the Father of his Country, whose tomb is near by, brought many good people here, but only for a day. Sentiment never built a city, never will.

"Most of us like the name Columbia. Once when I was teaching school in Oregon, a little girl gingerly asked me what tribe of Indians she would have belonged to had Columbus not discovered us. And, although I had a certificate for good moral character and was supposed to answer any question my little girl of eight years might be able to ask, I had to give it up and advise her to ask her mother.

But even the added sentiment for the great admiral and gratitude to him for discovering us and disposing of the danger of our being born to any particular tribe of Indians; even all this, let us observe, will not build nor perpetuate a great city.

## National Pride the Builder.

"What, then, built Washington city here in the grass roots by the classic Potomac, and over against the sacred soil of Virginia?

"Let me say national pride built, and is building, as never was city built before, our great marble and granite National Capital. And this same honest, upright, manly pride, going to make up the grand city that grew under the path of the sun. I think it must be something of the same sentiment, sense of devotion, soul, that founded and fashioned that once majestic theocracy, Jerusalem. Fair as the tents of Kedar or the curtains of Solomon.

"I am making no hazard in saying this, for I have heard so many great men quote lines from the Bible about Jerusalem, on looking out upon Washington, I am sure the thought is akin. As for myself, I don't mind confessing—and I am sure to be a pretty rough old fellow—that I can never catch a glimpse of the great rounded dome and the Washington Monument on my return after long absence, without having to turn aside by myself and fumble for a handkerchief. And nearly all of my Western friends, good, strong men, too, are almost quite as foolish. And thank God for all the foolishness of this sort. Tears, sentiment of this sort, make the cement of this mighty nation.

"Or is it some sense of rest that prevails here, the better manners born of the absence of commercialism, the presence of the President, the soldier, the sailor, the born and bred gentleman from abroad? But whatever it may be, you feel it and you love it. Your better nature comes to the surface. You broaden, body and soul, as you walk the broadest and cleanest streets in the world. Your nerves relax, you rest and you rest, and you are a bigger and a better man. Maybe that is why Washington is and forever must remain a sort of Jerusalem or a Mecca to the American; a city set apart from and above all cities of the earth.

## Washington in 1870.

"I first knew Washington in 1870, when the Monument was about half done. If I am not mistaken there was a 'bobtail' horse-car on Pennsylvania avenue where Walt Whitman once drove. The one palatial edifice away out in the wild grass and wild rose bushes by the side of Fort Circle was Stewart's Castle. This was built, or being built, by Senator Stewart, a Yale man who had married the daughter of Senator Henry S. Foote of Mississippi. It was in this impressive castle that on my return from Europe, in 1881, I first got the old and honored prospectus in the

law, Senator George H. Williams; the first Cabinet officer from all the great States of the extreme West. He had great faith in the city, and had bought land away out at the edge of the hill through which Sixteenth street is cut. He tried to save the sharply crescent from destruction; but there was a rage for railroad levels and that part of the comely contour of hills was annihilated.

## Cabin on the Hill.

"Meantime, I, believing in the judgment of the Oregon Senator, bought land out on the other side of Sixteenth street. I bought that particular spot of ground, where now stands a little log cabin house, just above 'Henderson Castle.' President Jefferson had set up the Meridian Stone there, hence the name Meridian Hill. But, as hinted before, it takes more than one single sentiment or one single sentimentalist, to build a city. I had hardly been well settled in my little log cabin before they—the city surveyors—began to have the earth carted away to my left and even in front of my door. Once, on returning from far away, I found my home could only be reached by climbing a ladder. Of course, it was foolish to build a cabin, and thus call attention to Meridian Hill, and my plans to restore the Meridian Stone. But I have no regrets about it. I meant well, and I wanted to make some of those who had been compelled to live in log cabins by the war feel less fraternal about it.

"Ah, yes. Thank you. I am asked to talk of Washington instead of self. But I want to tell about the meanderings of that Meridian Stone set up by Jefferson on Meridian Hill. For I hear there is a talk of turning that mutilated spot into a park. Let me venture to advise that this be done and that the stone be restored to its proper place.

## Meridian Stone's Wanderings.

"What of its story? You will find the account of it all in the archives of the Capitol. It is written on wide blue paper and very plain, covering many pages. The one important part is the description of the stone and the account of setting it in place. The engineer tells us that he, after planting it firmly, had a hole drilled in the apex and then, melting a silver dollar, poured it in the hole and then tamped it well with lead.

"I had a copy of this paper taken and, placing it in the hands of a detective, told him to trace the migration of the stone. He did it, and he found a sworn statement of it all. The stone was first displaced by those in charge

of the soldiers' temporary hospital on the hill during the war. Then, when stone was wanted for the fence at Arlington Cemetery, this, among other stones, was taken there. Then, after a new fence was put around the graves, the Meridian Stone was carried in a boat down to Alexandria, to be used in some similar way there. Then, after a few years, it found its way out to the Reform School, where it served as a hitching post.

## Sacred Hitching Post.

"Laying the facts before Captain Du Bois, my neighbor and the principal owner of Meridian Hill, he took me in his carriage and drove to the Reform School. We hitched to the Meridian Stone that had been set up in what was afterwards my dooryard by President Jefferson, and went in and asked some questions of the dense and indifferent keepers. Finding they knew nothing of the sacred character of their hitching post, we left things as they were, and Captain Du Bois tells me nothing since has been said or done about it as far as he knows.

"I wrote a long detail of all this for Henry Watterson, Murat Halstead, and the editor of the Washington Post, but was careful not to mention the silver dollar part of it for fear some one might mutilate the stone to get it out.

"Yes, yes. That's all about the Meridian Stone of Meridian Hill. But now that I have set down the facts about that silver dollar in the apex of it, I demand that this city be a guard over it and hold it secure till it can be set up where it belongs.

## When Fever Raged Here.

"But let me tell you, Washington was sickly in those days. Nearly everybody was pale and feverish in the face. You see this good, old earth of ours resents familiarity. You dig up dirt and dump it in a marsh for a few years and you fill the air with fevers; malaria, as the Italians call it in Rome; bad air.

"Two very great men and men widely different saved Washington; made it possible to build Washington. One of them was Shepherd, called 'Boss' Shepherd at the time. He it was who planted the tulip poplar trees

hovel. We need another 'Boss' Shepherd nearly all along Pennsylvania avenue.

"This big man had all the idiots to deal with that I met in trying to find and restore the Meridian Stone; and more, too. For example, he was enjoined and enjoined and enjoined by very demagogue that could dig up a

rid of a whole block of disease-breeding dens. To do this he gave a great feast and all sorts of entertainments

away down in Virginia, to which he persuaded every judge in the District. Then he set to work and pulled down hundreds of rotten old huts before a single judge could be found. This was one of his ways of trying to

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So let us celebrate in some sense of humility as well as great thanksgiving that we have risen from the ashes. \*\*\* And when our beautiful new house is entirely done \*\*\* let us show them what has been done in our ruined city in a single century.

JOAQUIN MILLER.

National Capital, I think it safe to say that in eight years our House will be built. Then let us call in our neighbors and tap our cider barrel and celebrate. This city by that time will surely be the very stateliest and most impressive in the world.

## Proposes Celebration in 1914.

"Let us see. We celebrated the opening chapters of the Revolution in Philadelphia in 1876? Well, let us here in Washington celebrate the closing chapters of the later war with our noble old Mother Country in 1914!

No, not to glorify ourselves at all are we to celebrate. We got thrashed and thrashed all to pieces here and had all our houses burned, all save the Patent Office. So let us celebrate in some sense of humility as well as great thanksgiving that we have risen from the ashes. Let us admit we all ran away from the British; all, every one except an old officer of the sea, who had his leg shot off and couldn't run a step. Let us read up this story, teach it to our children; show them that we were beaten and had our Capital burned, and that this may easily happen again unless we are good and remain united with a heart for the National Capital like unto that which filled the prophets round about Jerusalem of old.

"And when our beautiful new house is entirely done and amply furnished let us ask in all the Republics to the South, the Kings and Emperors to the North and East, and show them what has been done to restore our ruined city in a single century.

## Deprecates Faultfinding.

"Then in this spacious city of marble and maple, of poplar trees and true patriots, will we have song and sweet content. Let us in the decade that lies between this and the day of our next great centennial cease to find fault so incessantly with our Senators and officers high and low. Is a man bad simply because he has flourished while we have failed? For my part I exult that I am not on an eminence and therefore shall not fall. Let us, dear fellow-scribes, glory in the fact that there are so many men above us that the lightning must strike them first; and let us love and look up to them for their pluck, their persistence, and their devotion to American achievement.

"And, above all, let us refuse to fall in with Europe in her persistent assertion that we are a nation of money grabbers. It is all as false as the false story of hell-fire and brimstone. We are the least money-loving of all people on earth. And now one more paragraph about the celebration of our centennial bonfire.

"The Bible is sprinkled with examples of the heathen Damocles under his suspended sword. Pride runneth before a fall. Jesus did not come to us to urge in the hour of temptation. He knew too well and prayed only, 'Lead us not into temptation.' Liked the genie chaplain in the Senate at its opening, when he prayed that in this hour of prosperity we fall not into temptation.

## The Man on the Box.

"That bold and breezy stageriver of the Sierras upon his box with his dozen dashing horses was often in the old days persistently urged by some silly passengers and restless horses to 'let her go'.

"He relaxed the reins. Away and away with the wind down the steep! The silly, intoxicated passengers are exultant and wild with delight. We make the swift descent, as if by a miracle. He is the most popular stage driver in all the mountains. He makes it all right again and again. What praise! What pride! What popularity! But about the hundredth time one of his horses, perhaps the best and most spirited of all, kicks over the traces, others follow and what an end!

"And so it may easily be in this rich, prosperous, liberty-loving Republic. A heedless driver on the great high box, eager to please, courting popularity, relaxes his hold on the reins. Away and away down the steep! A spirited horse is over the traces! The ambitious man on the box has lost control! The reins slip from his hands! Smash! Crash! Our Capital is again in ashes! Glorious old San Francisco! In her pride and unexampled prosperity she flourished, a low and vicious element of foreign birth and blood. This at last got hold of the city. This mad mob assumed to be San Francisco. And it assumed that this wild and lawless element was the only San Francisco but all California, and began to laugh at the laws. And then the man on the High Box suddenly said:

"Steady there! Keep straight in the traces! There are \$9,999,999 in this stage. The army and the navy are behind it. Steady there, steady!

"And so it is that I invoke you that with the good men of old whose lessons of the divinely beautiful young Jew, Jesus Christ, we forget not our adversity in this day of boundless prosperity but in true devotion and



him out at last. He went away in disgrace to return an emperor.

## Hardships in Those Days.

The other great and by far greater man of the two honest and able city builders was Edmonds, of Iowa, whom President Arthur called in to help him build up the water works of the bankrupt and sickly city. The water of Washington was literally a stench in the nostrils. For my own part, I had to build up a cistern. I could not possibly use the water, and all the whisky was away down town. Besides that I had not yet learned to drink whisky, much as I needed it. So you see I was compelled to use British brandy and soda! Hard? Yes, indeed. We, the early builders of early Washington, had lots to endure.

"But one cheerful thing in those days were the dark funerals. The graveyard was a little back of my cabin. The funerals were always on Sundays; generally two brass bands and a string of happy dancing little 'Carls' half a mile long behind and on either side of the hearse and bands. I never saw such happy little folks in all my travels.

"And the music was good and the singing great. I recall only one couplet of chorus:

"'Tis written in de book  
Dat we git overtuck  
Some day."

"I miss their weird wails now. I am told the 'force' suppressed these funeral rals.

## Edmonds' Great Work.

"And what did Edmonds do to make the sickly city so healthful? Why, pure water and sewers, sewers so deep and long and everlasting that the whole face of the earth was upside down and impassable in many places for a long, long time. I saw some when they began to get to the bottom of the fever troubles by the Tiber, but not nearly such wonderful work as Edmonds ordered did I encounter there.

"New Washington? Now, look here. Go out and ask those dozen palaces that are just beginning to lift their shining fair faces to Heaven. Ask them about the future of Washington. They will speak for themselves. I venture to say that no city on earth is building so fast or nearly so finely as this, our Capital.

"But a man should not try to live in his house while he is building it. When it is done, entirely finished and entirely furnished, then, and not until then, let him move into it and invite in his neighbors and entertain them.